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Women Writers and Their Ancestors

Literary Foremothers: Women Writers in Dialogue with Tradition of Their Own / Katja Mihurko Poniž. – Reviewed by: Prof. Emeritus Dr. Neva Šlibar, Prof. Dr. Biljana Dojčinović, English translation: Leonora Flis. Nova Gorica: University of Nova Gorica Press, 2021, ISBN 978-961-7025-19-4 (PDF)

The textbook *Literary Foremothers: Women Writers in Dialogue with a Tradition of Their Own* by Katja Mihurko Poniž was created as part of a project within the framework of the mentoring program *Open Education for a Better World*, which funds the development of open access educational resources. It was written in English, and Mihurko Poniž states in the introduction that it “can be used as a learning or teaching material in the courses related to the history of women’s writing” (Mihurko Poniž 2020: viii). She highlights its three aims: “to present the richness and importance of women’s writing, to show how digital tools can help us in researching and studying women writers, especially their reception, and to make the recipients aware that women have a history of their own which is an equally important contribution to the history of humankind as the history of men” (Mihurko Poniž 2020: viii). The textbook is convincing in exposing the strong connection between women’s literary history and digital humanities, aiming to empower its readers to continue doing independent research by using digital tools. The key role different databases (such as *VRE NEWW Women Writers*) play in storing and finding information about female authors is clear throughout all chapters.

The textbook consists of eight chapters. Beside texts, each chapter includes five hours of work with other content (mostly documentaries and podcast episodes) and eight hours of further reading. Through seven chapters, Mihurko Poniž intertwines the stories of different women writers by using a variety of different multimedia resources – excerpts from their work that touch upon their literary predecessors or contemporaries, impressions of each other from other sources such as letters, open access documentaries and podcasts that are about their lives and work, biographies, critical contributions, etc. Furthermore, each of the chapters is structured like a lesson – questions and tasks accompany every piece, alongside other

previously mentioned external resources that deepen the readers' understanding of each of the topics covered. This way, the author manages to touch upon the most important theoretical concepts related to women's writing, (re)introduce lesser- or better-known women writers, and reveal the different historical contexts in which they wrote.

In the first chapter called "Thinking about female literary tradition", the author begins with the most important questions related to this topic – what literary tradition is and what concepts such as gender essentialism and antiessentialism are – while simultaneously providing insight into important feminist texts that cover these issues. Through *The Sisters*, a poem written by the American poet Amy Lowell, she points out that women writers contemplating their predecessors does not only occur in theoretical texts, but also the literary work itself, which is a common thread throughout all chapters. The author asks the readers to underline the names of female poets whose work they have come across so far. This way, she incites them to consider the poetesses and female authors as a whole and their position in the literary tradition, thereby confronting them with the (presumably small) number of female authors they had been exposed to up to that point.

In the second chapter, Mihurko Poniž intertwines the stories of Sappho, Christine de Pisan, and Caroline Norton, informing the reader that even Sappho has a foremother in the lesser-known Sumero-Akkadian poetess Enheduanna, who "lived and created approximately half a century before the creation of the most important work of the Sumero-Akkadian literature, namely, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*" (Mihurko Poniž 2020: 46). Then she draws the lines between Virginia Woolf and Aphra Behn, followed by George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Sand. Through the excerpts of their letters, critical texts, poetry, and prose, these authors express their admiration for one another. By contextualizing them together like this, Mihurko Poniž proves her thesis of the necessity of appreciating the work of women writers in connection with the work of their foremothers, who are their indirect or direct influences.

The importance of a foremother like Aphra Behn is above all practical for Virginia Woolf. To her, the first English woman writer that succeeded in earning a living by writing represents a watershed for women's writing and an encouragement to all women to earn "five hundred (pounds) a year by their wits" (Mihurko Poniž 2020: 58). Other examples of admiration are dominated by empathy, as is the case with Caroline Norton towards Sappho, as well as Emily Dickinson towards George Eliot, or solidarity when it comes to Jane Austen who uses her own novel to stand up for Maria Edgeworth. This distinctly empathetic attitude of solidarity that comes on the heels of admiration (or precedes it) is present in all connections

Mihurko Poniž makes between the writers. The attitude of Elizabeth Barrett Browning towards George Sand differs somewhat from the others. Its important component is also admiration towards the attitude and lifestyle of this author, not simply enthrallment with her literary talent. Mihurko Poniž subtly nudges readers to notice this by asking them to think about the female author whom they would address in the manner that Barrett Browning uses to address Sand, how they would express their words of praise, and whether they would commend her way of writing, personal integrity, or something else (Mihurko Poniž 2020: 166). This way the author emphasizes the importance of such examples for women in general – not only when it comes to their literary work, but also their everyday life. Beside the fact that the activities within the chapters point the readers toward additional resources or ask questions that should point out important aspects of the texts or deepen their understanding, some of the tasks such as this one are also creative. In the case of Aphra Behn, for example, the author invites the readers to write an essay or a poem, take a photo or a video, or paint a picture with the following title: “This is a flower I would put upon Aphra Behn’s tomb” (Mihurko Poniž 2020: 60).

The final chapter differs slightly from the previous ones. Here, Mihurko Poniž presents the reader with the lesser-known Scandinavian author Laura Marholm and her book *Modern Woman*. Although the ideas that Marholm espouses in it were considered contradictory and warranted different reactions, with the contemporary feminist public distancing itself from her, Mihurko Poniž cites her as a good example that illustrates the importance of the repeated reading of forgotten texts. She disregards Marholm’s problematic ideas, explaining that they were typical of German society of the time, and points out the value of this text that remained unacknowledged at the time it was published. Namely, Marholm insisted on her view that “a woman cannot create anything anew, cannot make a fresh start, rather, she believed that everything is just a by-product of or a link to something previously created” (Mihurko Poniž 2020: 198). Her early efforts within the discourse about the characteristics of women’s writing and the importance of the work of predecessors is particularly impressive from today’s perspective and deserves attention and a thorough analysis. By using this example, the author wishes to highlight the common phenomenon of the disparity in the reception of women writers’ work at the time of publishing as opposed to today when they are being rediscovered. This somewhat closes the circle she began in the first chapter by leading the readers to consider why numerous literary foremothers long remained forgotten.

In the introduction, Mihurko Poniž defines the target audience of this textbook in quite broad terms. The question of its ideal audience also poses itself from chapter to chapter. While it is true that some of the texts require a more detailed foray into literary analysis and being

familiar with literary theory so that the lesson aims could be fully achieved, the available resources and the way the questions and the tasks are formulated leave enough space for the chapters to interest, inform, and sensitize readers that are less informed about these topics. Beside independent reading and research, it seems that a textbook with such carefully designed chapters and tasks could easily be integrated into classrooms at different educational levels, depending on the curriculum and the reading abilities of students. The added value of a textbook designed in this way is reflected in its heavy reliance on digital humanities and digital tools overall, not to mention its accessibility. Databases and other multimedia resources that the author insists on throughout the tasks are valuable resources for further reading, besides being an important supplement to the texts contained in the textbook, and readers are motivated to use them further in independent research.

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